

APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES PATENT

PARALLEL REACTOR WITH KNIFE-EDGE SEAL

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RELATED APPLICATION

The present application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/607,535, filed June 29, 2000 which is a divisional of Application Serial No. 09/093,870, filed June 9, 1998. *Now Pat No 6,449,862*

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to parallel reactors, and more particularly, to a parallel reactor having a knife-edge seal.

The discovery of new materials with novel chemical and physical properties often leads to the development of new and useful technologies. The discovery of new materials depends largely on the ability to synthesize and analyze new compounds. Scientists are thus, always searching for a more efficient, economical and systematic approach for the synthesis of novel materials. Combinatorial technologies are often used to accelerate the speed of research, maximize the opportunity for breakthroughs, and expand the amount of

available information. Combinatorial chemistry involves synthesizing microscale quantities of a compound and then testing thousands of compounds quickly.

The use of combinatorial technologies allows high density libraries of very large numbers of materials to be created using parallel synthesis. High throughput screens are then used to test these materials for desired properties to identify potential optimized compounds. Combinatorial technologies may be used to optimize and validate many variations of a material, formulation, or microdevice. Variables such as temperature, pressure, atmosphere, and concentration can be quickly adjusted and tested in a single experiment.

Once a combinatorial library is created, hundreds, or even thousands of compounds must be screened. Existing analytical methods and devices which were originally designed to characterize a relatively small number of compounds are often not well suited to screen combinatorial libraries. For example, in tradition catalyst development, researchers synthesize relatively large amounts of a candidate compound. The compounds are then tested to determine whether they warrant further study. For example, initial testing may involve contacting a compound with one or more fluid phase reactants. If the compound produces some minimal level of reactant conversion to a desired product, the compound undergoes more thorough characterization in a later step.

Because synthesis consumes a large fraction of the development cycle in tradition catalyst studies, researchers have expended little effort to speed up the screening step. Thus, although test reactors have been steadily improved over the years, most were simply automated to reduce labor needed to operate them.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An apparatus for testing compositions is disclosed. The apparatus improves productivity in testing variations of compounds by permitting large numbers of compositions to be tested simultaneously (in “parallel”); in an efficient manner.

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An apparatus of the present invention generally comprises a base having a plurality of reaction wells formed therein and a sealing device positioned over the reaction wells for individually sealing each of the reaction wells. One of the sealing device and the base has chamfered ridges extending generally around a periphery of each of said plurality of reaction wells. The other of the sealing device and the base has a contact surface formed of a material softer than the material of the chamfered ridges to create a knife-seal between the sealing device and the base when the sealing device and the base are forced into contact with one another.

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The ridges may, for example, be machined into a base which is formed from steel and the sealing device formed from aluminum, tin, copper, or nickel. The ridges may also be formed by upper ends of reaction vessels which are inserted into the reaction wells. The sealing device may be a cover placed over the vessels or a separate sealing plate interposed between the base and cover.

The sealing device may also comprise a plurality of sealing caps for sealing each of the reaction wells. The chamfered ridge is formed in a lower end of the sealing cap and creates a seal with a gasket positioned on the base around a periphery of the reaction well.

In another aspect of the invention, a parallel batch reactor comprises a base having a plurality of openings extending at least partially therethrough and a plurality of vessels sized for being received in the openings. Each of the vessels has a closed lower end and an open upper end having a chamfered periphery edge. The reactor further includes a sealing device formed from a rigid material softer than a material of the vessels such that the chamfered edges deform the sealing device when the sealing device is forced into contact with the chamfered edges to seal each of the vessels.

The above is a brief description of some deficiencies in the prior art and advantages of the present invention. Other features, advantages, and

embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from the following description, drawings, and claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

5 Fig. 1 is a schematic of a first embodiment of a parallel reactor of the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a plan view of a base of the reactor of Fig. 1.

Fig. 3 is a bottom view of a cover of the reactor of Fig. 1.

10 Fig. 4 is a plan view of a base of a second embodiment of the reactor of the present invention.

Fig. 5 is a cross-sectional view of the base of Fig. 4 and a cover taken in the plane including line 5--5 of Fig. 4.

Fig. 6 is a cross-sectional partial view of a third embodiment of the reactor of the present invention.

15 Corresponding reference characters indicate corresponding parts throughout the several views of the drawings.

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simultaneous for two or more library members or carried out in a rapid serial manner. Changes in the test fluid resulting from contact with library members are used to identify members worthy of further study. In the following disclosure, the term "fluid" refers to any substance that will deform continuously under the
5 action of a shear force, including both gases and liquids.

The apparatus may be used to perform parallel synthesis or screening of materials or other experimentation involving reactions of multiple components. For example, the apparatus may be utilized for reactions where one or more components is a gas such as hydrogenations, carbonilations, oxidations and
10 polymerizations with gaseous monomers. The apparatus may also be used with homogeneous, chiral, or heterogeneous catalysts (i.e., catalysts that enable catalytic reactions to occur with the reactants and catalysts residing in different phases (e.g., solid/liquid, solid/gas, liquid/gas)), or polyolefin and butyl rubber polymerizations. For example, in such applications, a plurality of heterogeneous
15 catalysts (or catalyst precursors) having different compositions can be incorporated into the apparatus such that the plurality of catalyst candidates are simultaneously contacted with a reactant-containing fluid. The catalyst materials may be bulk or supported catalyst materials.

The disclosed invention is not limited to screening catalysts, but can be
20 used for rapid screening of many different types of materials. For example, the

apparatus can be used to screen library members based on their ability to filter out or adsorb a specific gas species. Similarly, polymeric materials synthesized using combinatorial methods can be screened for thermal stability by measuring the concentration of gaseous decomposition products in a fluid in contact with heated library members.

It is to be understood that the applications described herein are merely examples of uses of the apparatus of the present invention and that the apparatus may be used for other applications without departing from the scope of the invention.

Referring now to the drawings, and first to Fig. 1, a parallel batch reactor is schematically shown and generally indicated at 10. The components of the apparatus 10 are shown spaced from one another in Fig. 1 to show details of the components. The reactor 10 includes a base member 12 having a plurality of reaction wells 14 formed therein and a sealing device (plate) 16 configured to create a seal with the base to individually seal the reaction wells. The reactor 10 further includes a cover member 18 and bolts 20 for attaching the cover to the base 12 and forcing the sealing device 16 into intimate contact with the base to create a seal. As further described below, an upper surface 22 of the base member 12 includes a plurality of chamfered ridges 26 which are used to create a knife-edge seal between the sealing device 16 and base. In order to create this knife-

edge seal, the ridges 26 are formed from a material that is harder (e.g., has a higher Rockwell Hardness) than a material of the sealing plate 16. The knife-edge seal is created by the ridges 26 deforming a surface of the sealing device 16 at contact locations and in some instances the ridges may also cut into the sealing device.

The base member 12 may be formed from a material such as stainless steel or other relatively hard materials. The base 12 is preferably formed as a solid block with a plurality of openings extending partially therethrough to form the reaction wells 14. Components used in the synthesis or screening may be added directly to the reaction wells 14 or the reaction wells may be lined with an inert liner to prevent reactions between chemicals and the base member 12. As shown in Figs. 1 and 2, the reaction wells are machined into an upper planar surface 22 of the base member 12 and are preferably machined as close as possible to one another.

The ridges 26 are preferably integrally formed with the base member 12 when the reaction wells 14 are machined into the base. The ridges 26 extend around a periphery of each of the reaction wells 14 to provide individual sealing for each reaction well. The chamfered ridges 26 preferably extend upwardly from the upper surface 22 of the base member 12 at an angle of approximately 45° to 90°. The ridges 26 may extend approximately .010-.030 inch from the upper

surface 22 of the base member 12, for example. The ridges 26 may also be formed separately from steel or other suitable material and attached onto the upper surface 22 of the base member 12. For example, the raised ridges may be formed as rings and placed around the periphery of each reaction well 14. The base 12 can then be formed from aluminum, titanium, Teflon, or nylon, for example, and can also be formed from a laminate construction. The chamfered ridges 26 may also be formed in the sealing device 16 rather than the base member 12, in which case the sealing plate 16 will be formed from a harder material than the base member. However, since the sealing plate 16 is easier to manufacture and replace than the base 12, the ridges are preferably formed on the base. If the ridges 26 are located on the sealing plate 16, the plate will have to be positioned such that the ridges are properly aligned with the reaction wells 14.

As shown in Fig. 2, the base member 12 includes 100 reaction wells 14 arranged in a rectangular array. The reaction wells may have an internal volume of between 10 and 500 μ l, and more specifically an internal volume of approximately 120 μ l, for example. It is to be understood that depending upon the scale of the apparatus, the base 12 may contain a greater or fewer number of reaction wells 14 of various geometric shapes arranged in any configuration. For example, the reaction wells 14 may be arranged to correspond to a standard microtiter plate format. The microtiter plate is a widely used means for handling, processing, and analyzing large numbers of small samples in the biochemistry and

biotechnology fields. Typically, a microtiter plate contains 96 identical sample wells in an 8 by 12 rectangular array on 9 millimeter centers. A wide variety of equipment is available for automatic handling, processing, and analyzing samples in this microtiter plate format. The reactor may also be used in scaled up
5 screening in which case the volume of the wells is larger and the number of wells smaller.

A bottom wall 25 of the reaction well 14 is preferably left with sufficient material to withstand pressures (e.g., 20 bar to 450 bar) applied to the bottom wall during reactions taking place within the wells. The base member 12 may also
10 serve as a temperature control means for controlling the reaction temperature in the reaction wells 14, in which case the bottom wall 25 of the reaction wells is sized to provide the required conductivity between an external heat source, such as a heating plate on which the reactor 10 is placed, and the reaction wells. The
15 reactor 10 may be placed on a temperature control plate which is contiguous to a lower surface of the base 12 for the transfer of thermal energy therebetween. The thermal control plate may be a plate formed of thermally conductive material with passages for conveying a heating or cooling fluid through the plate, or other heat generating device, as is well known by those skilled in the art. The reactor 10
20 may also be placed in an oven to heat the components within the reaction wells to 350° - 400°C, for example.

The sealing plate 16 is formed from a relatively soft, rigid material such as aluminum, copper, tin, or nickel. As shown in Fig. 1, the plate 16 is sized to cover all of the reaction wells 14. The sealing plate 16 has a thickness sufficient to allow sealing with the chamfered ridges 26 of the base member 12 without initiating cracks in the plate. For example, the plate 16 may be between 1/8 and 1/4 inch thick. The sealing plate 16 includes a generally smooth planer lower surface 28 for engagement with the ridges 26 of the base member 12. The sealing plate 16 is preferably replaced after each experiment.

The materials of the base member 12 and sealing plate 16 are preferably selected to be chemically suitable for the application (e.g., will not be attacked, solubilized, softened, or otherwise interact with the reagents, solvents, solids, products, or other components which are either added to the vessel or produced during a reaction sequence). The materials are also preferably chosen to assure that reactants, products, or by-products of the reaction are not adsorbed or otherwise trapped by the materials.

The cover member 18 may be formed from the same material as the base member 12 or other material that is sufficiently rigid so that it does not deform when the bolts 20 are torqued. The cover 18 preferably has dimensions (length and width) generally corresponding to the dimensions of the base member 12 and

includes openings 30 arranged to align with openings 32 in the base for receiving the bolts 20 or other suitable attachment means (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

The seal between the base member 12 and sealing plate 16 is created by applying a torque to the bolts 20 (e.g., 200 kg) which applies a force to the cover 18 which in turn forces the sealing plate into sealing engagement with the base 12. It is to be understood that attachment means other than bolts 20 may be used to force the sealing plate 16 into sealing engagement with the base 12. For example, external clamps (not shown) may be used to attach the cover 18 to the base 12.

The cover 18 may also be formed from a soft metal and the sealing plate removed so that a seal is created directly between the base member 12 and cover, as described below with respect to the second embodiment.

Fig. 4 is a plan view of base member 62 of a second embodiment of the present invention, generally indicated at 60. The base member 62 is generally circular in shape and includes 152 reaction wells 64. A cross-sectional view of the base 62 taken in the plane including lines 5--5 of Fig.4 is shown in Fig. 5 along with a cover 72. Reaction vessels (or vials) 68 are inserted into the reaction wells 64 for receiving components of the experiment. The vials 68 are formed from a hard material such as steel and the cover 72 is formed from a softer material such as aluminum, copper, tin, or nickel. Upper edges 70 of the vials 68

are chamfered to create a knife-edge seal when the edges of the vials are forced into the softer material of the cover plate 72. Bolts (not shown) are inserted into aligned openings 74 in the base 62 and cover 72 to force the cover into intimate contact with the vials 68. The base 62 and cover 72 may also include a central opening 66 for receiving a bolt or other attachment means.

A sealing plate as shown in Fig. 1 for the first embodiment, may also be interposed between the base 62 and cover 72 so that a seal is created between the sealing plate and base rather than the cover and base. Also, a coil spring (or elastomeric material) (not shown) may be placed at the bottom of the reaction wells 64 to force the vials 68 upward and bias the upper ends of the vials against the cover 72 or sealing plate.

Fig. 6 is a cross-sectional partial view of a parallel fixed bed reactor, generally indicated at 80. The parallel fixed bed reactor 80 may be, for example, a reactor as described in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/093,870, filed June 9, 1998, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. The reactor 80 includes a base member 82 configured to hold a plurality of vessels 86 (only one shown), a plurality of vessel covers (sealing caps) 88 configured to individually seal each of the vessels, and a cover member 90 for holding the vessel covers in place. The vessel 86 comprises a hollow right circular cylinder having a fluid permeable upper end 92 and lower end 94. A quartz paper frit (not shown) may

be placed in the lower end 94 of the vessel 86 to hold a sample in place, but allow fluid to pass therethrough. A gasket 100 formed from a soft material such as copper, nickel, tin, or aluminum is seated in a groove 102 machined in the base 82 to form a contact surface of the base. The vessel cover 88 includes a cylindrical opening 106 for receiving the vessel 86. A lower end 110 of the vessel cover 88 is chamfered (e.g., forms a chamfered ridge) to create a knife-edge seal between the vessel cover and the gasket 100. Belleville washer springs 114 are placed above the vessel cover 88 within an opening in the cover member 90 to push against an upper surface 116 of the vessel cover and cause the lower end 110 of the vessel cover to deform or cut into the gasket 100, thereby forming a knife-edge seal. The gaskets 100 are preferably replaced after each experiment. The base 82 may also be formed from a soft material (e.g., aluminum, copper, tin, nickel) so that the vessel cover 88 can seal directly against the base 82 without the need for the gasket 100.

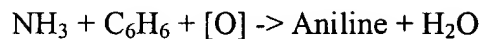
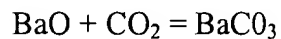
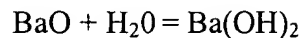
Use of the apparatus disclosed herein for combinatorial (i.e., high-throughput) approaches for screening libraries of materials may include an initial, primary screening, in which various materials are rapidly evaluated to provide preliminary data and optimally to identify several candidate materials having characteristics that meet or exceed certain predetermined metrics (e.g., performance characteristics, desirable properties, unexpected or unusual properties).

As shown in Fig. 1, a catalyst 40 may first be placed in the reaction well 14, followed by quartz paper 42 and ammonium carbonate ((NH₄)₂CO₃) 44 with another quartz paper 42 and barium oxide (BaO), sodium oxide (Na₂O), potassium oxide (K₂O), or strontium oxide (SrO) 46 for use in analyzing an aniline reaction. Each reactor well 14 may include, for example, 60 µl liquid reactant, 10 mg solid reagent, and 5 mg catalyst.

The following example illustrates principles and advantages of the invention.

An apparatus 10 having 100 reaction wells 14 as shown in Fig. 1 was used. Five milligrams of a catalyst was first placed in the bottom of each of the reaction wells 14. A quartz paper was placed over the catalyst and ten milligrams (NH₄)₂CO₃ was put on the quartz paper. Sixty milligrams of BaO was placed over the second piece of quartz paper. The BaO was used to absorb CO₂ during the reaction. The sealing plate 16 was positioned over the reaction wells 14 and the cover 18 was aligned with the base 12. Bolts 20 were inserted into the aligned openings 30, 32 in the cover 18 and base 12 and torqued to force the sealing plate 16 into contact with chamfered ridges 26 of the base and seal each of the reaction wells 14. The reactor 10 was then placed in an oven at 300°C for four hours.

The following reactions occurred:



5 Aniline yield up to 1% was reached in the reactor.

Although the present invention has been described in accordance with the
embodiments shown, one of ordinary skill in the art will readily recognize that
there could be variations made to the embodiment without departing from the
scope of the present invention. Accordingly, it is intended that all matter
10 contained in the above description and shown in the accompanying drawings shall
be interpreted as illustrative and not in a limiting sense.